Evaluating Barrier-Free Access to Teen Health Information on the Web

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Background. With the help of teens in Nova Scotia, Dalhousie medical students have designed pages on the Internet to provide information on sexual and reproductive health issues that face young people today. In December 1995, the Teen Health Web Site (http://chebucto.ns.ca/Health/TeenHealth/index.html) was launched on the Chebucto Community Net, a non-profit organization which provides free Internet services in public locations and private homes.

Medical students played a major role in the development and maintenance of this web site. Teens identified areas of interest in focus groups facilitated by medical students. Medical students developed the content as a set of hypertext pages. These were reviewed by a communication skills specialist and other faculty in the Medical School, as well as teachers, librarians, teens, and community-based organizations. The content was organized in seven color-coded sections: 1) healthy sexuality, 2) sexual orientation, 3) sexually transmitted diseases, 4) pregnancy, 5) women's health, 6) men's health, and 7) sexual assault. The latest enhancement of this site involved joint writing efforts of medical students and youth groups.

Methodology. Evaluation information was gathered using the following instruments:
1. Electronic Mail Comments. An address was provided on the Teen Health Web Site to enable readers to send comments.
2. Web Page Access Counts. The number of times a page was accessed was recorded.
3. Online Survey Questionnaire. This was designed to record demographic information and reader opinions.
4. Information Requests Bulletin Board. This provided a forum for requesting specific information.

Results.
1. Unsolicited comments received via electronic mail were very favorable. Some comments led to minor modifications. Other comments resulted in postings to the Information Requests Bulletin Board. It was through electronic mail that we were advised of awards and annotated links to our site from other sites.
2. The web page access counts exceeded 72,000 in the first year, and we are currently averaging over 14,000 accesses per month.

3. Initial evaluation results from the Teen Health Web Site Survey indicated we were able to collect demographic statistics and usage patterns. From the comments we could analyze how information was utilized (e.g., decision making, school reports).
4. The online Information Requests Bulletin Board was developed and pilot tested. We received very specific and explicit information requests and thus suspended the service to address the unanticipated issues of providing this type of information.

Conclusions. Based on electronic mail, web page accesses, and early online evaluation results we conclude the web site is a useful source of health information for teens. Further accolades from other media sources, including radio, newspapers, and magazines support this conclusion.

Information found on the web removes the barriers for teens. No longer are geographical distances, embarrassment, race, sex, physical appearance or socioeconomic status a barrier for teens wanting health information.

Future directions, pending funding, include expansion of content areas and development of a cadre of medical students and clinical faculty willing to respond to information requests. We already have a networked physician community and the delivery of health services via networks is a principle activity of Halifax-based Telecom Applications Research Alliance. We need to develop a general funding model to support new ways of delivering health information, including internet and telephone. We also need to explore our responsibility in the legal/medical/cultural context for providing individualized information online. Future research needs to address the following questions:
- Are we bridging the gap and facilitating teen's access to physicians, health care professionals, and others or hindering access by becoming a surrogate health care professional?
- What are the social and health care outcome ramifications of providing on-line health information to teens: is health maintained or improved?
- How does this information source function as an educational intervention in consumers making health-related decisions?